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A CRITICISM OF CRITICAL REALISM

CRITICAL REALISM occupies a half-way house between moderate Realism and moderate Idealism, and it is exposed to the adverse winds that blow from both quarters. It is a well known theory as to the machinery of what is called perception and the nature of the entities experienced in perception, which has been propounded by seven American professors as a counterblast to the six American Neo-Realists.

In theory, Critical Realism is one doctrine to which the seven American professors unanimously subscribe; in fact, it comprises at least two distinct doctrines, each of which contradicts the other. Whether this difference of doctrine has been detected and waived in the interests of unanimity, or whether the desire for unanimity has obscured the perception of difference, cannot be determined here—although the number of foot-notes contained in the volume entitled, *Critical Realism*, purporting to explain or resolve differences which are unimportant, suggests the latter view.

Of these two doctrines, the theories of Professor Drake and Professor Santyana may be taken as representative. I propose to consider these theories in turn, to suggest certain criticisms to which they appear to be open, and to indicate the reasons why it is impossible for a thinker who agrees with Professor Drake to subscribe to the doctrine of Professor Santyana, and vice versa.

According to Professor Drake there are involved in perception three separate existents: (a) the object of perception, (b) the mental state of the conscious organism which perceives the object, (c) the intermediary processes such as ether waves, sense organs and neural correlates. In addition to these three existents there are also what he calls the data of perception, the entities which are actually perceived. These data are not existents; they are variously called character complexes or essences, and they are brought into being by the coming into contact of (a) the object of perception, and (b) the mental state of the conscious organism. The coming into experience of the datum is explained as follows: contact between (a) and (b) involves the exercise of a certain influence by (a) over (b); this influence is causal, what it causes among other things being—in true perception—the appearance of the characteristics of the object as the data of perception. These data are further described as projections of our mental states; “they are,” in Professor Drake’s words, “never *found* there by a sort of telephatic vision, but are *imagined* there by a mind,” and we are told that there exist in, or in intimate connection with the brain, a series of mental states which have the qualities that make our data appear. Since, however, it was the influence of the particular object (a), and not of any other object, that caused (b) to project the data, the data have a very definite reference to the object in question; and in fact, as has been already remarked, in true perception they *are* the actual characteristics of the object. Thus perception is a process of imagination, since in perception we experience data which the organism, affected by the outer object, “*imagines* as characteristics of the object in those vivid ways we call ‘seeing,’ ‘feeling’ (with our fingers), etc.” We are also told that though the data may have being or ‘subsistence’ independently of the perceiver’s consciousness of them, they

have not independent existence. We implicitly attribute existence to them when we imagine them as being *out* there in the world, and since in true perception the data or imagined character traits of the object really *are* the characteristics of the object, the attribution of existence is in such a case justified: in false perception it is not, and the data then have being or subsistence only.

Before proceeding to consider the view of Professor Santyana, I propose to submit certain objections to the theory of Professor Drake.

(1) The theory involves a relationship between two entities which exist and one which subsists. The entities which exist are the mental state of the knowing mind and the object: the entity which subsists is the datum or character complex which forms the content of the knowing mind. Now the analysis of perception is such that it requires us to hold that the object is never, and can never under any circumstances, be directly perceived. "Our data of perception," says Professor Drake, "are not actual portions or selected aspects of the objects perceived." But if this is so, in what sense are the objects perceived at all?

The difficulty here is simply the old difficulty that discredited the philosophy of Locke, the "object" of Professor Drake is the "substance" of Locke, and the theory of Professor Drake is the Representationalism of Locke.

For if we never know the object, but only character complexes which we like to think are, in veridical perception, the characteristics of the object, we cannot know anything about the object: we cannot know that the object exists, and we cannot know it is the cause of the occurrence of our data; while the belief that our character complexes sometimes correspond with its characteristics will remain a guess, which we shall regard as probable or improbable in so far as we already share or reject the beliefs of Pro-

fessor Drake, but cannot be cited as evidence of the truth of these beliefs.

(2) From the fact that we never know the characteristics of the alleged object, it follows that we can never know whether our character complexes correspond with them or not: hence we can never know whether our perception is accurate or not, and the Critical Realist criterion between true and false perception can never in practice be applied.

Professor Drake likes to think that perception is in the main accurate, and invokes at the beginning of his essay a number of Pragmatic considerations in favor of believing that it is so. But wishes father thoughts, they do not breed evidence: the fact that we would like a thing to be true does not mean that it is true; while the reference to the Pragmatic criterion as affording a meaning for truth is expressly disavowed by another Critical Realist.

Objections of this and of a similar character are in part considered by Professor Pratt in his essay on the "Possibility of Knowledge," in the course of which he endeavors to answer them. The gist of his reply consists in representing the view of the Critical Realist and that of the complete sceptic as the only possible alternatives, and then dilating upon the improbability of the sceptical view. "If the critic is right," says Professor Pratt, "we must suppose that by an incomprehensible collection of coincidences his own senses, the senses of all other observers, and the details of the prior and subsequent experiences of all concerned conspire to deceive us." But an expression of doubt as to the validity of the Critical Realist position does not surely involve the acceptance of so distressing an alternative. Professor Pratt presents us with a choice between accepting all our perceptions as accurate, or impugning them all as deceptive; but this dichotomy is an unreal one which ignores the real difficulty and the real

question, the difficulty being that in practice we know that our perceptions are neither all true nor all false, but sometimes true and sometimes false, and the question at issue how we are to distinguish the true from the false. It is the first requisite of any theory of perception that it should suggest some method of solving the difficulty involved in the answer to this question, and it is precisely this requisite that both Professors Pratt and Drake fail to supply.

There is, however, another item in Professor Pratt's defence which deserves mention. He appeals, in support of the accuracy of perception, to the uniform character of the testimony of the senses: each sense supports and bears out the other, and in so doing affords evidence of the truth of its testimony. Also there is the appeal to other persons. But here again Professor Pratt fails to appreciate the issue, which is not that of always true perception against always false perception, but between any true perception and any false one: and the trouble is that in a false perception the senses support one another just as frequently as in a true one, as for instance in the perception by a color blind person of a green apple. But in any event the attempt to bolster up the validity of one sense by another when it is the validity of sense perception as a whole which is questioned, will not work. The belief that my sense of sight which informs me that I am writing at a table is guaranteed by my sense of touch which also assures me of the table, is only reasonable if the validity of my sense of touch is established to begin with: but you cannot establish the validity of an A that is fallible, by an appeal to a B, which must itself be assumed to be fallible for just so long as the fallibility of A is itself in question. If A is fallible then it derives no support from an equally fallible B; if A is infallible it does not need it.

Let us suppose, however, that the testimony of our senses is always, and in every respect unanimous, does this

fact necessarily constitute a guarantee of their truth? Coherent error is by no means to be ruled out as a possibility, and is certainly not ruled out by Professor Pratt's analysis. The world of dreams and hallucination is frequently as coherent as that of every day life, and is not necessarily distinguished by contradictory deliverances on the part of the senses. And in any event, so long as the Critical Realist denies us all direct knowledge of the object perceived, the world of every day experience *need* possess no greater degree of connection or correspondence with the world of external reality than the nightmare phantasies of the injudicious diner; it may do of course, but the Critical Realist can neither prove that it must do, nor can he distinguish the occasions on which it does from those on which it does not.

I now proceed to a consideration of Professor Santyana's view, or rather to those aspects of it which differ from Professor Drake's.

The chief point of difference is contained in Professor Santyana's description of the datum. The datum is for him a logical essence, a quality which is permanent and given. It neither lapses nor moves forward, and it is therefore outside the flux of temporal events. We are expressly told that the circumstance that a datum is given is incidental only and does not affect the nature of the datum, from which it follows that the essence is not changed either by becoming a datum or by being abandoned for another. In experiencing a datum we are in fact becoming acquainted with an entity which subsists independently of our acquaintance, an entity which is immutable and eternal, and Professor Santyana proceeds to speak of the "datum" as Plato's τὸ ὄντως ὄν or as that which is intrinsic and essential.

The first point to notice about this conception is its wide divergence from that of Professor Drake. For Professor

Drake, as we have seen, the datum is literally a product of our imagination: it is "projected" or "imagined" as being out there. If this is so, it clearly cannot be out there before we projected or imagined it, and the circumstance of its being imagined becomes not an incidental attribute but a most essential fact about its nature, the very cause of its being. In short, the datum for Professor Drake is a mental construction which when we are lucky is identical with the characteristics of the so-called object.

But Professor Santyana's departure from the pure doctrine of Professor Drake raises its own crop of difficulties. In the first place it reduces the occurrence of perception to a mere accident. Thus Professor Santyana speaks of what happens "when our erring thoughts light up the intrinsic possibilities." Now Professor Drake attributed the occurrence of perception or the projection of data, to the emanation from the object of an influence upon the brain of the perceiver. But for Professor Santyana the experiencing of a datum happens by chance. We are not, as we might have been, told that for each object there subsists a corresponding datum or series of data, and that by some queer alchemy an influence exerted by the object makes us perceive not the object but the corresponding datum. Had we been told this, we should have a theory of perception that possessed some relationship with that of Professor Drake; but even so neither Professor Drake nor Professor Santyana could explain how we perceive erroneously. For if the cause, and the only possible cause of the perception of a datum is the influence upon the brain of an object possessing characteristics which are those of the datum perceived, how comes it that in error we perceive data which *ex hypothesi* are not the characteristics of any object? Whence come these data? What in fact is the starting point of the whole process of erroneous perception? If we conceive of perception with Professor

Drake as the projection of data which are the characteristics of the object, how can we project data which are not? If, on the other hand, we hold with Professor Santyana that the realm of essences is lying out there waiting to become the content of our experience, and that therefore "our object is simply what we happen to think of," we are forced to the conclusion that the objects of all possible perceptions, as for instance the objects of our perception of blue snakes when we are drunk, already subsist in their infinite multiplicity waiting to become our data when we light on them.

But if we are to adopt this latter view, we are faced with a refusal to apply Occam's razor of the most extravagant kind. It is a significant fact that in considering Professor Santyana's view we have necessarily drifted into speaking of the essence or datum as the object, and in so doing we have only followed his own terminology. But what has been happening all this time to the object in Professor Drake's sense of the word, that entity whose characteristics are or are the same as our (in Professor Drake's language) "imagined data"?

Well, it seems that the world is for Professor Santyana as for Professor Drake, peopled with these latter kind of objects, just as for Professor Santyana alone it is also peopled with independent logical essences, the relations between essence and object being such that when we perceive correctly we have hit on an essence that corresponds with the character of the object, when not, not. But what in the name of Occam's razor is the sense of peopling your universe with an infinite number of objects and essences, both of them lying out there, of which the object never can be an object of perception, while the essence always is an object of perception, whenever perception occurs; and both of them of such a nature that when a purely incidental and adventitious phenomenon such as perception, a phenome-

non which is irrelevant to the being of either, takes place and happens also to be correct, the essence is said to have the characters of the object, although since the object can never be perceived, it passes the wit of man to know whether the essence does have those characters or not.

And as a concluding comment on Professor Santyana's view, I should like to ask how it comes about that if essences become objects by accident, we all of us perceive what is approximately the same world. If the essence whose characteristics are those of an alleged object which is a motor car, is perceived by me by accident, and not because a motor car is really there, or is really perceived there, how comes it that an accident of precisely this same kind brings the same set of essences to the notice of my chauffeur at precisely the same time. Does not the repeated sequence of such accidents suggest that the process of perception is not an accident at all, but is dictated by some feature in the real which affects in much the same way, and affects directly the organisms of two similarly constituted persons?

It would be interesting to examine the essays of the other authors of Critical Realism, to see how they oscillate between the two views of the nature of the datum expounded by Professor Drake and Professor Santyana respectively. It would be interesting too to notice how the fact that the word "datum" is normally used in that one of its two senses which happens to be most convenient for the purposes of the argument at the moment, has not a little to do with the persuasiveness of their writing. It is, of course, unfortunate that his method may be inverted; and the critic who with equal authority adopts whichever of the two senses he pleases for the purpose of discrediting the argument, may achieve disastrous results. I will subject to this treatment one sentence from Professor Pratt's essay which typifies the ambiguity that so frequently results. "A sharp distinction must," he says, "be drawn

between object and content, between that which is before the mind and that which is within it." Now the word "object" here may be used either in the sense in which Professor Santyana speaks of the datum or essence as the object or in Professor Drake's sense of the word. If it is intended to refer to the datum according to Professor Santyana's use of the word "object," then we may suggest that as we always project or imagine our own data (Professor Drake), the mind can never contemplate anything but its own mental creations, and we are back on the subjective Idealism of Berkeley. If, on the other hand, "object" here means the real object which exists and not the datum which subsists, then the mental content must be the datum and the datum can be nothing but the mental content. But how can a mental content be a logical essence?

An analysis of Professor Roger's essay on the Problem of Error yields results which are not dissimilar. His theory leaves us with the same difficulties as those we have already experienced, the difficulty, namely, of explaining, (1) how we can ever tell a true perception from a false one, and (2) how an erroneous perception ever occurs. For as we never know the object we can never tell whether it has the qualities of the sense data we imagine, and as our attribution of those same qualities is generated by its influence of the object which is supposed to possess them, it is clear that we can never be stimulated to project or imagine qualities which the object does not possess.

A theory of error which fails to deal satisfactorily with the question of how we distinguish the true from the false, and the problem of the genesis of error, can only be termed inadequate.

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